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“Democracy requires grassroots participation that is embraced by the majority of the population: The Provincial Councils are one of the best ways to inspire such participation and to promote long-term, local democratization in Afghanistan.”

Why Afghanistan's Provincial Council Elections Matter

Summary

- Afghanistan's Provincial Councils (PCs) represent one of the best hopes for the future of local democracy in Afghanistan. Yet since their shaky formation in 2005, they continue to be overlooked by international actors preferring to interact with parliamentarians, ministers and appointed governors.
- The significance assigned by Afghans to winning PC seats has steadily increased over the last decade. Indeed, for many, the April 5 PC elections will do more than the presidential poll to determine whether democratic practices continue to take root in local politics.
- PC elections offer a chance to build local, personal ties and accountability mechanisms connecting to increasingly centralized government resources, and, in particular, an opportunity for a new generation of young, motivated Afghans to begin their political careers. As the locally-visible manifestation of the Afghan political system, PCs are the immediate face of democracy—or a lack thereof—for many Afghans.
- In 2009, with most news stories covering the widespread fraud in the presidential contest, the uproar over the fraud and delay throughout the PC polling process rarely received coverage on newspaper front pages. Yet those problems contributed significantly to people's sense of alienation and disillusionment with their country's political actors and electoral institutions.
- In spite of these experiences, Afghans are once again preparing to go to the polls. Voters, candidates, parties and local organizations are putting greater emphasis than ever on the process of provincial council polling—expressing concern about the prospects for fraud, mobilizing around their candidates and campaigning in earnest. If due attention to the process is not paid by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and by international agencies, popular participation in future elections could drop. Prospects for Afghan democratization will depend much on how these and future provincial-level elections are conducted.

The Increasing Significance of Provincial Councils

At their inauguration in 2005, newly-elected PC councilors could be forgiven for being unsure about their role over the coming years. With an official mandate released only after campaigning started, and the PC law waiting for parliamentary approval until more than a year after councilors were elected to office, no one could readily articulate the job of a PC member. As one member of the Balkh PC expressed in July 2006, “For four months we have not been able to do anything as we have had no building, no logistical support, no salary, no clear mandate or any regulations to follow.”¹ The initial enthusiasm after the elections soon tapered off into boredom and frustration, with many PCs relying on provincial governors for funding and thus having little incentive or ability to monitor the performance of these appointed leaders.²

In spite of this, by the time campaigns for PC seats began in 2009, the number of candidates across the country had increased by 300, and a surprising number of incumbents were re-contesting their positions.³ Perhaps more telling was the decision of many PC members not to run again but rather to campaign in the following year's Wolesi Jirga (lower house) polls.

In the four years since they had been established, PC seats had become valuable political commodities—spaces in which relatively young or unknown individuals could make names for themselves and begin political careers, albeit ones often connected to existing powerbrokers. Councils varied across the country both in terms of the access they provided for members to government resources and the influence they held over government officials. Initially, most Provincial Councils were weak and disorganized, with little public recognition. Yet in some areas, the Councils have had impact. For example, in Nangarhar, the PC became widely known for the determination shown by half of its members to hold Governor Gul Agha Sherzai accountable for his alleged involvement in corruption, embezzlement of development funds and illegal land grabs. On the other hand, in Balkh, the Council remained beholden in most senses to Governor Mohammad Atta Noor. Nevertheless, across the country PC positions were now (salaried) vehicles for self-promotion, providing a valuable connection between the home districts of councilors and the provincial-level administration. Whatever the official mandate, the informal roles of PC members had propelled them into positions of increasing influence.

The PC Polls in 2009: A Local Catastrophe

PC elections in 2009 took place alongside the presidential poll, which for the international community and media took precedence. Indeed, very little attention was paid to the local-level elections that were being contested fiercely in communities across Afghanistan. The connection between the two elections was important as well: In many cases, deals for mutual support were made between presidential and PC candidates, heightening the importance of PC council seats and their potential connection to the center. PC campaigns were organized locally by the same brokers that organized presidential campaigns, campaign rallies often included endorsements for candidates in each race and networks of ballot-stuffing and duplicate-voting often overlapped. The day after the polls, pink results sheets displayed outside local polling stations prompted frenzied mobile phone calls as polling agents informed their candidates of the news—which in many cases would only change once the IEC had “re-counted” and published the “official” results. The changes between the first, directly and publicly presented results and those that were declared final after alterations in Kabul convinced many that power had been captured by the elite, and that results had been negotiated behind closed doors. In Nangarhar, this suspicion was confirmed by the delay between polling and results: It took four months for the winning candidates to be announced, showing local communities that any hint of a democratic process had devolved into political maneuvering and backroom bargains.⁴ It led one former government worker to compare democracy to lipstick: “it looks beautiful but soon wears off,” he said.⁵

Over those four years, PCs had not become vehicles for democratization and were often as plagued by the grip of current elites as any other institution in the country. But setting aside the patronage and power-brokering so pervasive in all levels of Afghan politics, many PCs made a connection, if shaky, between local communities and the state. Many Afghans considered that a connection worth having. Indeed, the widespread fraud and violence that took place over local-level election contests across the country clearly demonstrated the significance that had come to be attached to PC seats.

The Importance of Provincial Councils in 2014 and Beyond

Another five years on—and indeed a year late—PC elections will take place on April 5. And once again, the international community is paying little notice, with the presidential poll and uncertainties over the future international troop presence overshadowing the local elections. What is perhaps surprising is that in spite of the widespread fraud and elite bargaining that seemed to have destroyed much public hope in the democratic process in 2009, informal campaigns for PCs this time began well ahead of the official start date of March 3, with the nomination period having been hotly contested and the subject of much conversation across the country. Political parties have selected their own candidates to support, strategically narrowing these down to two or three per province so as not to divide their votes too much, and they are placing great emphasis on winning PC seats. PC candidates themselves are using parties and presidential candidates as means to gain material and political support for their campaigns, turning up at these candidates' own rallies and introducing themselves to voters. A number of parties are planning to organize joint campaigns for their preferred presidential and PC candidates. As a result of these interconnections, it is likely that fraud in both polls will also be deeply intertwined.

Arguably, this level of enthusiasm and preparation ahead of time might not have occurred had PC elections this year not coincided with the contest for a new president, signifying Afghanistan's first democratic transition of power, the importance of which is heightened by the imminent departure of foreign troops. This context is important, as it indicates the potential re-division of political power in Afghanistan. The enthusiasm to participate in the 2014 elections suggests a widespread interest in helping determine how that re-division of political power occurs, but also a clear intention among many elites to claim their own territory in the new political landscape.

This also means there is greater incentive among all involved to monitor local elections—in particular for fraud—and thus PC elections may well take place in a more transparent manner this year than in 2009 (though a narrative of fraud will undoubtedly form part of any losing candidate's post-election rhetoric). Whether or not actual fraud levels are lower in the provinces than in 2009, the counting of provincial ballots at the center must be conducted according to due process that is communicated to voters. With more at stake now than in 2009, the public outcry at unexplained discrepancies between local and central polling centers could rise to new levels. By contrast, if PC elections are conducted well and accorded by international and national government actors with the significance they have in the provinces, they could set a precedent for future elections. PC elections with those characteristics could prove a particular boon to a younger generation of Afghan leaders, many of whom have been frustrated by the slow advance of democracy and economic growth in the country.

If PC positions continue to be seen as an effective means of participating locally in political processes, this development could encourage a younger, better educated generation of Afghans to engage more actively in politics. Democracy requires grassroots participation that is embraced by the majority of the population: The Provincial Councils are one of the best ways to inspire such participation and to promote long-term, local democratization in Afghanistan.

For this to happen, the international community, IEC and Afghan government do not necessarily need to spend large amounts of money on new electoral programs, but should place greater emphasis on the Provincial Council polls during the election period. In particular, they need to take steps that reflect the importance of the PC vote, such as:

- Emphasize the PC elections publicly through more frequent acknowledgement of their importance in public service announcements and official statements from embassy and monitoring groups.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Noah Coburn is a political anthropologist at Bennington College in Vermont. Anna Larson is a researcher in governance in fragile states and associate research fellow at the University of York, United Kingdom. They have been conducting research on politics, democratization, violence and elections in Afghanistan since 2005. Their book *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape*, which focuses on elections and the challenges of democratization in Afghanistan, was published in December 2013 and is available from Columbia University Press.

- Assign election monitors to focus as well on provincial-level polls while observing the presidential vote.
- Pay particular attention to the counting process at the central level and communicate reasons for any delays or changes to the voting public.
- Create clear reporting mechanisms at the most local level possible, so that communities can quickly address discrepancies between local counts and how they are recorded in Kabul.
- Ensure that future international funding for Afghan election support focuses both on presidential contests and those at the provincial level, including parliamentary elections scheduled for 2015.
- In the longer term, work to support young PC members so that a new generation of Afghans becomes active in the democratic system.

Notes

1. Interview, AL, Balkh PC Member, July 7, 2006.
2. For more on candidates' expectations surrounding the PC elections in 2005, see Wilder, Andrew (2005). "A House Divided? Analyzing the 2005 Afghan Elections." Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, pp. 41-42.
3. In 2005, 3,025 candidates competed in the PC elections nationwide, and, in 2009, 3,324 were listed on the ballots in total.
4. For more on Provincial Council elections in Nangarhar, see Coburn, Noah and Larson, Anna. *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape*. New York: Columbia University Press (2013). Chapter 8.
5. Originally translated as "Democracy is like the lipstick of women, which looks beautiful but does not have any resistance against licking," cited in Larson, Anna. "Deconstructing Democracy in Afghanistan." Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, p. 47, May 2011.



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